

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL BAPTIST CHURCH  
60 North Ashland Avenue  
Chicago, Illinois

Commission on Chicago Historical  
and Architectural Landmarks

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FIRST CONGREGATIONAL BAPTIST CHURCH  
(Originally the Union Park Congregational Church)  
60 North Ashland Avenue  
Chicago, Illinois

Dates of Construction: 1869-71

Architect: Gurdon P. Randall

#### HISTORY

Although the edifice of the First Congregational Church was built in 1869, the congregation dates back to 1851. At that time a group of 48 abolitionist members left the parent church, the Third Presbyterian, over the slavery issue. The departing members felt that the General Assembly of the church had not adopted a strong enough position against slavery. A man by the name of Philo Carpenter led the dissidents into their own congregation in May of 1851. In addition to housing worship services, the new church was used as a way station in the underground railroad for escaping slaves. During those years, the chapel was derogatorily known as "Carpenter's Nigger Chapel."

Philo Carpenter, known as the founder of Congregationalism in the Chicago region, was born in Savoy, Massachusetts in 1805. He arrived in Chicago in July of 1832. Deeply religious, he organized the first Sunday school service in Fort Dearborn the Sunday after he arrived in Chicago. This evolved into the Home Sunday School of the First Presbyterian Church. Carpenter was Chicago's first druggist, opening a drug store in a small log home on a bank of the river at a point that is now Lake Street. Not only was he instrumental in founding the First Congregational Church in 1851, but he also helped to organize the First Presbyterian Church in 1833, and the Third Presbyterian Church in 1847. The Chicago Theological Seminary was greatly aided by him through his generosity in giving funds (totaling \$6,000), land, and the Carpenter Chapel which is now part of the First

Congregational Church. In the chapel is a marble bust of Carpenter executed by Lorado Taft. He was also a member of Chicago's first Board of Education (Carpenter School erected in 1868 was named after him), managing director of the Chicago Bible Society, and an incorporator of the Relief and Aid Society. His home was located at Washington and Carpenter Streets and occupied an entire block. Carpenter died on August 8, 1886.

The congregation of the First Congregational Church moved several times until the present structure was erected. Its predecessor was originally a small wooden chapel which was enlarged in 1859 at a cost of \$1,200. building was enlarged again in 1865 and 1867 but burned in 1869. Prompted by the action of a Reverend Charles D. Helmer, the present building was planned and the cornerstone laid on August 7, 1869. (This is evidenced by a plaque in the north wall of the tower.) At the time of its construction, the building cost \$150,000. was known as the Union Park Congregational Church. Andreas stated that, "Fronting on Union Park it has one of the most desirable sites in Chicago, and is no mean ornament to that portion of the city."

#### THE ARCHITECT

Gurdon P. Randall began studying architecture at the Boston office of Ashar Benjamin. He practiced architecture in Chicago for 34 years after arriving in the city at the age of 30. His work was better known at that time than any other architect in the west and he concentrated mainly on schoolhouses, churches and court houses. In his design of the First Congregational Church, he initiated the amphitheatre seating arrangement which was much copied. His design of the church brought him great fame as an ecclesiastical architect.

Randall was described in the October, 1884, issue of Inland Architect as:

Beside (sic) being an architect of wide information and honor to his profession, Mr. Randall was a man of sterling worth, his broad

nature and genial temperament drawing to him friends wherever he went and his upright character securing to him a reputation for honesty and integrity that was always beyond reproach. As an architect of the old school, always true to the principle of his art, and designing with a broad and positive expression, his works will long stand as examples of the thorough work of a thorough man.

Also designed by him was the Spaulding Building built in 1872 and located at 301-03 South State Street which is now demolished. He also designed the Plymouth Congregational Church (1867-71) which was located at the southwest corner of North Wabash Avenue and East Eldrige Court. This church was destroyed by fire. The Old St. Mary's Paulist Church was built for the congregation of the Plymouth Congregational Church after they lost their building to fire. This church was located at 901 South Wabash and was recently demolished. It was also designed by Randall.

#### PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

The First Congregational Baptist Church was originally known as the Union Park Congregational Church. It is quite large, seating 1500 people. Due to the nature of a congregational church service, the building is almost square in plan; the transept is extended but slightly out from the nave in the form of a latin cross. This church accomodates an amphitheatre style seating arrangement. It is Gothic in style, but the Gothic elements are treated quite freely and in a manner similar to other church edifices of the period.

Because of the great width of the interior, the roof is a free span composed of a large wooden truss system. The ceiling is suspended from this truss. The beams of the truss, approximately 2 feet square, were prefabricated and bear the markings for their positioning and the name of the manufacturer. In 1927 deterioration of the truss work necessitated its shoring up and restoration, including the addition of metal tie-rods and

collars to insure its strength. This was done without affecting the design of the structure.

The church is of masonry construction. The outer wall is faced with Lemont limestone, a material similar to that used for the Water Tower, and in popular use for churches of the 1860s and 70s. The inner fabric is brick with larger pieces of the exterior stone penetrating completely through to bind the wall together.

On the ground floor is located a broad vestibule opening on to Ashland Avenue. Running the width of the facade, this vestibule is flanked by twin staircases leading to the sanctuary above on the main floor; there is also a large assembly hall and subsidiary service rooms at this level. The sanctuary, entered from a vestibule at the main floor level similar to the one below, occupies the entire main floor. The dimensions of the sanctuary are yet to be determined. The flooring is wood and the walls are plastered and trimmed in wood. Filling the apse behind the pulpit and communion table is a huge pipe organ, the mechanical equipment for which is located directly behind.

The organ dominates the interior space. The pipes of the organ actually conceal four organs, two of which are located in the balcony. Built by W. W. Kimball and Company and designed by Dr. William Lester, it is the largest enclosed pipe organ ever made. It cost \$250,000 which would be about one-half million dollars today. The organ was not installed until 1927 and because of its size structural work was needed in order to support and house it. The work was started in January and was not completed until June. The organ was dedicated on October 9, 1927.

Also in 1927, it became obvious that restoration was needed in the sanctuary and this room was closed. The timbers of the roof trusses had dried out and thus were extremely dangerous. Auxiliary roof trusses were put in, the foundations and walls were strengthened and the structure was completely redecorated. It is thought that \$150,000 was spent on the work but it did not alter the church architecturally.

In front of the organ on the main floor is the pulpit. The pulpit furniture was originally in the 1851 church. The top of the communion table is made of Italian marble.

Twin staircases in the vestibule of the main floor level lead to the balcony above, which is cantilevered out from the exterior walls on all four sides and is further supported by cast-iron columns. The balcony is gracefully shaped, curving gently away from the choir in the shape of a broad oval; the choir section immediately before the organ pipes is slightly convex in shape however. The balcony is wood with a wooden railing.

The sanctuary is lighted by 10 narrow, pointed-arched stained-glass windows flanking the nave, and one larger window in each end of the transept and the narthex. Behind the organ in the gable of the apse is a smaller round window.

The stained-glass windows continue from the main floor below through the balcony and upward. The sanctuary is further lighted by six chandeliers. The ceiling is peaked following the general outline of the cruciform shaped roof. It is plastered and detailed with wooden ribs, defining its structural shape. The ceiling springs from a wooden ledge embellished by Gothic tracery of carved wood.

The attic and bell tower located on the northeast corner are reached through the continuation of the northern staircase of the vestibule. The attic space, between the false ceiling and the roof, is occupied by the wood truss system and is approximately 20 feet high. It is lighted by small round windows at the ends of the nave. The roof is slate.

Immediately adjacent to the south is a smaller chapel, the Carpenter Chapel. The chapel is long and rectangular in shape. It is constructed of the same stone as the main church and is similar in design to the main church. The interior is plastered and trimmed in wood, and is treated more simply than the main church. Behind the pulpit is a pipe organ which extends over the width of the building.

